

# Boating



# Boating Safety 101

It's imperative for boat owners to know basic boating safety.

In 2022, the Coast Guard counted 4,040 accidents involving recreational boats.

Those accidents killed 636 people and caused 2,222 injuries and \$63 million in damage to property. Alcohol was a leading contributing factor in fatal boating accidents, the Coast Guard says, with other causes being inattention, inexperience, excessive speed and equipment failure. You can protect yourself and your family on the water by following a few basic safety steps, including not drinking and driving, even on the water.

## BASIC BOATING SAFETY

The University of Rochester Medical Center warns boaters to check weather and water conditions before leaving home. Make sure it's safe to be on the water with no lightning or storms in the forecast.

Always tell someone where you'll be boating and when you expect to be back. Make sure someone knows what your boat looks like. Keep Coast Guard-approved distress devices such as flares, distress flags and lights on hand. Make sure everyone has a Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device or life jacket and knows how to wear it properly. Remember, the Coast Guard says that everyone 13 and under must be wearing an approved life jacket at all



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times. Don't carry more people than is listed on your boat's capacity plate.

Have a first aid kit on hand. Complete first aid kits are available at most pharmacies and retail stores. If you're putting together your own kit, the American Red Cross recommends it have bandages,

gauze, antibiotic cream, antiseptic, tweezers and a thermometer.

Inattention and an inexperienced lookout are top contributors to recreational boating accidents, the Coast Guard says. The University of Rochester warns that boaters should keep their eyes open

and always know who is in and around their boat. Pay attention to no wake zones and speed limits. Keep an eye peeled for tree limbs, sandbars and other obstructions.

## BOATING COURSES

Some states recommend or even require boating safety

courses before you can hit the water. In Florida, for example, anyone born after Jan. 1, 1988, who will be operating a boat in Florida with an engine of 10 horsepower or more must complete an approved boating safety course and get a Florida Boating Safety Education ID card.

# Boating Without a Motor

Kayaks and canoes may not have motors but, just as with bigger boats, safety should come first.

The National Park Service says kayakers and canoeists should check the weather before heading out and should not consume alcohol while on the water.

## TYPES OF BOATS

There are several types of kayaks and canoes on the market and each have their own bodies of water to which they are suited.

- Sea kayaks are long, slim boats designed for use on salt-water. They're usually between 14 and 18 feet long and between 18 and 24 inches wide. They have bulkheads that prevent water from flooding the boat.

- Recreational or general purpose kayaks are for placid rivers, ponds or small lakes. They are shorter than 14 feet and have a larger opening for the paddler.

- Canoes are wider than kayaks and have higher sides, which can make them harder to control on open water or in windy conditions.

## PRE-TRIP CHECKLIST

Once you've got the right boat for the job, make sure you've met all the legal regulations for operating a craft in your state and chosen body of water. Some areas only allow



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motorless craft, some states require registration or safety courses. Talk to the store where you purchased or rented your craft to learn more about the regulations in your area.

Before you hit the water, inform someone on shore where you're going and when you plan to return. Dress appropriately for the weather and wear an approved personal flotation device. Check your

equipment before setting out and follow the manufacturer's recommendations for the use of its products. Ensure the following safety precautions:

- The drain plugs are closed.
- Hatches are closed and secured.
- Any mounted accessories are secured.
- Rudders and other steering and propulsion are secured.
- Any batteries are sufficient-

ly charged and are free from debris and corrosion.

- Connections are clean and tightened.

## SAFETY GEAR

Old Town, a maker of personal watercraft, suggests carrying safety gear with you on every trip, including:

- A sponge or bilge pump
- A tow line
- A dry bag with extra food,

water and sunscreen

- A knife and basic hand tools or a multitool
- A first aid kit
- A repair kit and spare parts
- A spare paddle
- A paddle float or other rescue aid and a throwable flotation device
- Flares
- A VHF radio
- An airhorn or whistle
- Navigation lighting

# What Are Pontoon Boats?

Pontoon boats are large craft with flat decks floating on top of long tubes called pontoons.

Two pontoons are the standard, but some boats have three pontoons (tritoons). These boats are family friendly, accessible and have great safety ratings.

## PONTOON BOAT SAFETY

Before setting out, make sure that both you and your boat meet all local and state boating regulations. This may mean taking accredited boating safety courses in your state and registering your boat with the proper authorities.

You should have approved and properly fitted life jackets for every passenger you carry. Most states have laws requiring children to wear life jackets at all times. Passengers should know where their life vests are and how to put them on properly. Have throwable personal flotation devices on board and required signaling devices, such as flares and distress flags. You will need a sound-producing device such as a whistle or air horn. Your boat should have a fire extinguisher. Make sure to regularly check its expiration date.

## GETTING FAMILIAR WITH YOUR BOAT

Make a full and complete walkthrough of your new pontoon boat before you leave the



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dealer. This should include the location and operation of all the controls, including safety gear. Verify that you can find and operate navigation equipment, lights, horns and the engine cutoff switch.

Also on board should be

docklines and an anchor, a first aid kit, a paddle in case of engine failure, a VHF radio with weather alerts, a waterproof flashlight and basic tools.

## ON THE WATER

Before leaving shore, inform

someone who is on board, where you're going and when you'll be back. Don't drink and drive and make sure you have enough fuel to last the day.

Once you're out, don't go too fast and operate at speeds that are safe both for the conditions

and for the passengers on board. Obey basic navigation rules and avoid erratic maneuvers. Before anyone takes a swim, shut off the engine and disconnect the engine cutoff safety switch. Keep swimmers away from the propellers.

# Boating Etiquette

Etiquette isn't just about place settings and saying please. There's etiquette on the water, too, just like there is on the road.

These are unspoken rules that people are expected to follow, but aren't in any manual. Your boating class may cover some of these, but in case it doesn't, keep reading.

## RIGHT OF WAY

On the water, the stand-on vessel has right of way and the give-way vessel should move to accommodate it. If a vessel approaches from the right, it is the stand-on vessel. If a vessel is having difficulty steering, it is the stand-on vessel.

When two boats are passing head on, both vessels turn to starboard and pass port-to-port. Sailboats have right of way over powerboats. If the sailboat is running with an engine, it's considered a sailboat even if the sails are not up. Human-powered vessels such as canoes or kayaks, have right of way over any other vessel, including sailboats.

If you're being passed by another vehicle going the same way, you must maintain your course and speed. Should that put anyone in harm's way, slow down and give way to the other vessel. Your primary job as a captain is to keep everyone on the water safe.



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## ANCHORING RULES

When entering an unfamiliar anchorage, notice how the other boats are tied and do what they do, using the same amount of line and distance between vessels. If you do anything differently, such as use two anchors when everyone

else has one, you could move in a way that could cause a collision.

Respect your anchored neighbors. Keep your music down and don't run a generator while others are sleeping. Go slow through the anchorage and watch your wake. Some

harbors have a speed limit; be careful to observe it at all times.

## HELPING OUT

In general, you should offer help to other boaters. If you're on the ocean, you're legally obligated to render aid to distressed vessels so long as it's

safe to do so. Use VHF channel 16 for hailing and distress calls only; take long-winded chats with other boaters to other channels. Save mayday calls for real emergencies — the kind where there's an immediate danger to life, property or the environment.

# Keeping Your Boat Clean

A clean boat is a safe boat. Keeping your boat as clean as you can could extend the life of your boat and its parts.

Here's how to keep your vessel squeaky clean and well maintained, inside and out.

## EXTERIOR

Hulls and other gel-coated surfaces need to stay shiny. Every spring, Discover Boating says to apply two layers of paste wax to the clean surface. Every month thereafter, apply a liquid carnuaba wax to maintain the finish. Every time you go out on the water, wash the boat down with a boat soap that contains some liquid wax. Treat the bottom of your hull the same if it sits on a trailer or lift. However, if your boat sits in a wet slip, paint the bottom with an antifouling paint.

Clean engines regularly. Wax the outside of outboard engines regularly, then wash with soap and water after every use. Under the cowl, regularly wipe away dirt, being mindful of electrical wiring and other sensitive components. Don't use harsh cleaners; leave that job to the pros.

## INTERIOR

Most boat interiors are lined with marine carpet. Start cleaning it by using a vacuum to remove loose dirt, then



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scrub it down with a bristle brush, soap and water. Park trailered boats on an incline so the water can drain. If you can't do that, use a wet-dry vacuum to remove any excess water.

If the interior isn't carpeted, it may be non-skid fiberglass.

Wax would make it too slippery, so you can't treat it like you do your hull. Instead, scrub it with a stiff bristle brush, soap and water. Tackle stains with a gentle cleaner, making sure any cleaners with bleach are rinsed thoroughly. After it's cleaned, treat it with

a specialized non-skid treatment. They contain polymers to help the shine and protect the non-skid surfaces.

Marine vinyls are typically treated with antimicrobial compounds, which can protect them from mold and mildew. Avoid any harsh cleaners

that can damage those compounds. Keep your vinyl as clean as possible, washing it with a gentle mix of soapy water and a soft rag after you go out. Use a special marine vinyl cleaner on any tough stains and follow it up with a vinyl protectant.



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# Boat Trailering Safely

Even if you keep your boat in a wet slip or marina, you may have to, from time to time, trailer your boat for maintenance or to keep it out of harm's way.

Moving your boat on land has a whole other set of rules and regulations.

## **LOADING YOUR BOAT**

Start by idling up to the launch ramp, Discover Boating says. Your driv-

er should back the trailer slowly into the water, then park the tow vehicle and set the parking brake. The trailer should be as straight as possible and to a depth that will allow the boat to float over the rear two-thirds of the trailer.

Idle the boat over the bunks of the trailer and align the bow peak with the trailer bow stop. You may need to trim your outboard motor or otherwise drive up so the prop doesn't hit bottom. When the boat bumps the bow stop or gets close, have a helper clip the winch strap to the bow eye and use the winch to pull the boat snug to the winch post. Secure the safety chain.

If the boat ends up crooked on the trailer, back down the ramp a little to allow the boat to float and center itself. Then, tilt the motor or drive up and have the vehicle driver pull the boat and trailer slowly up the ramp. Pull your rig out of the way of ramp traffic to pack up gear and clean your boat. Before you pull onto the road, check your tire pressure and the trailer lights. Check the trailer coupler on the hitch.

## **DRIVING WITH YOUR BOAT**

Your boat and trailer add length and weight to your vehicle. Stopping dis-

stances and turns will be much different than when driving with your vehicle alone. Give plenty of time and room for you to maneuver in traffic safely.

Windy days can complicate trailering. Large vehicles develop high pressure in front of them and low pressure behind as they move along. When you're being passed, your rig may be pushed to the right by the high and then sucked behind by the low. Be ready for the sudden shifts and steer a little left and then right during the passing process. If the wind picks up, pull over until it calms down.

# Spring Boat Maintenance

Spring's warmer weather has many a boater itching to get out on the water. But there are a few things Discover Boating says you should do before you crank up the motor and hit the waves.

## FLUIDS AND FUEL

Check all the fluid levels, including the engine oil, power steering, power trim reservoirs and coolant. Change any fluids if you didn't before winterizing your craft.

Inspect the fuel system for leaks and damage, paying special attention to hoses, connections and tank surfaces. Damaged fuel hoses can feel soft or brittle or show cracks. Don't use fuel that contains more than 10% ethanol. It can damage your engine.

## BELTS, CABLES AND HOSES

Belts, cables and hoses can become brittle and may crack over the winter. Belts should fit tightly around pulleys. Check the pulleys for black residue, which may mean your belts are worn. Check for cracks or swells on the outer jacket of the throttle, shift and steering control cables. That could indicate internal corrosion.

## PROPELLERS AND HULLS

Inspect your propellers for dings, pitting, cracks and distortion. Vibration can be an indication of a damaged propeller, and damaged propellers can damage your drive train.

Secure the propellers and replace the bearings regularly. Inspect the hull for blisters, distortions and cracks. Clean the

hull, deck and topsides. Make sure the drain plug is securely in place before every launch.

## SAFETY GEAR

Make sure your life jackets are in good condition and that there are enough on board for everyone, and that the jackets are the correct size for each person's body weight.

Fire extinguishers should be

the correct size and class for your boat and they should be fully charged and stowed in the proper space.

Consider having your boat inspected by the U.S. Coast Guard, USCG Auxiliary or U.S. Power Squadrons. Have properly installed and working carbon monoxide detectors in any enclosed and semi-enclosed areas.

## ELECTRICAL SYSTEM

Thoroughly inspect your electrical connections. Make sure they're all tight and corrosion free. Remove any corroded terminals and use a wire brush to clean them and all cable ends. Have your battery tested to make sure it can hold a charge, then charge it fully. Have a qualified professional regularly inspect your electrical system.

